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Book review: The End of Homosexual?

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Book review: The End of Homosexual?

Abstract

Book review of: Dennis Altman, *The end of the homosexual?* Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2013, ISBN 9 7807 0224 9815, 272 pp., RRP A\$29.95.

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Book reviews

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Dennis Altman, *The end of the homosexual?* Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2013, ISBN 9 7807 0224 9815, 272 pp., RRP A\$29.95.

In 2012, the newly elected Liberal National Party government in Queensland overturned laws allowing civil unions for same-sex couples. What had seemed an unstoppable march to equality for gays and lesbians was not only stopped in its tracks, but thrown into reverse. Hard-won rights were suddenly seen to be all too easily lost. For many lesbian and gay Queenslanders, it seemed that the institutional homophobia of the Bjelke-Petersen era, once thought dead and buried, had only been resting. This event raised significant questions for and about Queensland's lesbian and gay community. What, for example, could it be said to indicate about mainstream acceptance of homosexuality? Were gay and lesbian Queenslanders now considered equal members of society, or was heterosexuality still a prerequisite for inclusion? And what did it say about contemporary gay and lesbian life that civil unions and marriage had been elevated to such pivotal goals of political activism?

In *The end of the homosexual?*, Dennis Altman only mentions these Queensland events in passing, but they can nonetheless be seen as emblematic of many of the book's key concerns. Forty years after the publication of his first book, the landmark *Homosexual: Oppression and liberation*, Altman reflects on four decades of change in the lives of homosexual people. What he finds is improvement, certainly, but also complexity and contradiction. He argues that 'the story of the past forty years is not simply one of linear progress towards acceptance, nor of successive generations simply experiencing their homosexuality in very different ways', but rather the development of a less easily defined reality (2013: 36). While lesbian and gay activism has made extraordinary gains, and while inclusion and acceptance have developed further than many would have dreamt back in the 1970s, homophobia and heterosexism continue to discriminate and exclude. Equally, tensions exist within a community seeking inclusion in the mainstream while still celebrating its own difference and moving towards equality in ways that, to some, seem to favour the mundane at the expense of the radical.

Although Altman has been a central figure in gay liberation politics — and later HIV/AIDS advocacy — across much of those four decades, he is not concerned here with replaying old arguments or with clinging to the same positions he held in the heady days of 1970s 'gay lib'. He is as interested in critiquing his own earlier work as he is in critiquing what he sees as both the missed opportunities and great successes of subsequent LGBT activists. He notes, most particularly, the enduring and perhaps even strengthening use of homosexual identity labels, something Altman once argued would melt away with growing acceptance and change (hence this book's questioning title). He does, however, offer valuable challenges both to

the more recent development of queer theory and to the predominance of marriage equality as an issue for current LGBT activism.

Informing Altman's arguments is a diverse range of sources, from Marcuse to Halperin and including the likes of *Brokeback Mountain* and *Modern family*. His gaze is sweeping, incorporating moments of memoir alongside social, cultural and political analysis. By his own admission, the personal outlook of the book leads Altman to a deeper analysis of the experiences of gay men than it does of lesbian or trans issues. There remains, however, value in analysis which highlights the specificities — as well as the commonalities — within the often disparate LGBT coalition.

Interesting to note is Altman's calling to account of other social commentators such as George Megalogenis, Gideon Haigh and Jeff Sparrow, whose work generally ignores homosexual lives. It seems that while same-sex marriage may be a very well-covered area of public debate, the inclusion of non-heterosexual experiences in other areas of writing and research remains limited. As Altman argues in the book's coda, 'What has been of huge consequence to those of us who have lived it has had remarkably little impact upon the way society tells the story of the last forty years.' (2013: 202) This suggests the underpinning contradiction for a community simultaneously included within but excluded or absent from mainstream narratives.

I would hope that Altman's book gains a readership both within the queer community — which often seems sadly ill-informed about its own past — but also more broadly. It is an accessible book, well written, generous and thoughtful. Dennis Altman deservedly enjoys a career as one of Australia's great public intellectuals. His insightful, and at times very personal, new book makes another valuable contribution.

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Francesca Rendle-Short, *Bite your tongue*, Melbourne: Spinifex, 2011, ISBN 9 7818 7675 6963, 246 pp., RRP \$29.95.

In a recent article (*Queensland Review* 19.2), I argued that the works of Jessica Anderson, Janette Turner Hospital and Vivienne Cleven trace Queensland as a 'limit space' that can be appropriated to map and narrate traumatic memory, and to describe a kind of unbounded space of freedom for women writing (Gilder-sleeve 2012: 206). Francesca Rendle-Short's *Bite your tongue* (2011) joins this matrilineal tradition of the Queensland story and the 'return to Brisbane narrative' (Rendle-Short 2007: 8) in its project of revisioning and reimagining a very unusual childhood.

Bite your tongue is a fictionalised memoir, a formal move that enables, Rendle-Short says, looking at difficult memories 'sideways' (quoted in Evans 2013) or, with reference to Turner Hospital, returning to the past 'obliquely' (Rendle-Short 2007: 2). Rendle-Short's mother, Dr Angel Rendle-Short, was a prominent 'anti-smut' campaigner in Queensland in the 1960s and 1970s. Her crusade to protect the